Elements of Fairy Tales

A fairy tale is a fictional story that may feature folkloric characters (such as fairies, goblins, elves, trolls, witches, giants, and talking animals) and enchantments, often involving a far-fetched sequence of events. The term is also used to describe something blessed with unusual happiness, as in "fairy tale ending" (a happy ending) or "fairy tale romance," though not all fairy tales end happily. Tales with very similar plots, characters, and motifs are found spread across many different cultures. Fairy tales also tend to take on the color of their location, through the choice of motifs, the style in which they are told, and the depiction of character and local color.

1. Archetypal Characters
Archetypal characters are recognizable to us because they appear so often in Literature and life. Many of the characters in fairy tales illustrate the division of class and socio-economic status in feudal societies. Several examples follow.

   The Innocent/ Good—a kind, often intelligent and oppressed character who is helped by others and who usually wins.

   The Villain—a character aligned with the forces of evil such as a dragon, ogre, witch, demon, an evil stepmother, or a sinister gnome who usually loses.

   Royalty— a character born to a noble or royal family of landowners such as a prince, a princess, a king, or a queen. Action often takes place in or around a castle.

   Trickster—a character—who manipulates others for his/her own benefit.

   Guardians—fairy godmothers, mentors, magical helpers, or other guides, donors, benefactors, and helpers.

   The Poor—A girl, a family, a shepherd, or others who are trying to eke out a living to have enough to eat.

2. Archetypal Themes
Archetypal themes are recognizable to us because they appear so often in Literature and life. In many European fairy tales, the most common of these themes address issues that came into stark relief with the adoption of religious virtues and the concept of sin. These issues include:

   Poverty—A poor working girl, a poor family, a poor shepherd, or poor people trying to eke out a living to have enough to eat.

   Gluttony—A child succumbs to temptation.

   Starvation— A family stealing to eat for survival.

   In Christian cultures, you are also likely to encounter the remainder of the seven deadly sins—envy, pride, sloth, wrath, avarice, lust—in fairy tales.

   Quests—The hero is sent by a superior to find something. The quest is often in the form of a traveler’s tale.
3. Universal Truths
Fairy tales typically touch on some universal experience or hope such as:
- love as necessary for survival
- coming of Age/ rites of Passage
- triumph of the poor
- human weakness explored
- human strengths glorified-kindness, generosity, patience

4. Common Motifs
   Special Beginning and/or Ending Words
   “Once upon a time,"
   “They lived happily ever after.”
   Sometimes, there’s a surprise ending...

   Magic and Enchantments
   anthropomorphism-talking animals/objects fairies, trolls, elves, goblins
   spells, curses, sorcery
   magic words or phrases
   sleep-extended sleep, death-like trances

   Number Patterns
   things, phrases, tasks appearing in threes

   Cleverness and Absurdity to Illustrate Righteousness
   word games/ riddles
   tall tales--slight exaggeration to outright hyperbole
   impossible tasks--require, ridiculous, fantastic effort to complete

   Interesting Objects
   The inclusion of keys, passes, and the opening of new doors

5. Common Conflicts
    Youngest vs. Oldest
    Blood Relatives v. Step Relatives
    Good vs. Evil
    Light vs. Dark

6. Common Structures
    Rise
    Restoration
    Cautionary
    Exemplary
Fairy Tale Interpretations & Criticism

When you think fairy tale, you think, “children.” But pay close attention to the stories and you will see complex meanings and adult themes that are often meant not just for children.

Jungian Archetypes
Man’s collective subconscious, collective dream, shared experiences, deepest desires, fears

Freudian Psychoanalysis
The id, the ego, the superego are always warring – our primal needs at odds with our consciences

Feminist Theory
Aims to understand the nature of inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations and sexuality; themes: fertility, discrimination, stereotyping, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression, and patriarchy

Morphology
Analyzes the function of each character / action = a tale is composed of thirty-one elements and eight character types; Vladimir Propp, Russian fairytales

Historic Analysis
Views tales a way to preserve history, legend, and customs

Moral Lessons
Charles Perrault’s versions all end with a lesson.